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Farmers, we salute you

By JOEL WILSON

Glasgow Daily Times

Perhaps our readers noticed some additional agriculture news in our Thursday edition, the day of the week we usually publish our ag news.

Our new reporter Brad Dickerson went out to talk to farmers about what they're doing this spring and our shooter Jamie Ray brought back some excellent photos of farmers getting busy with chores delayed by weather.

We have just finished observing National Agriculture Week (March 19-25), a time for celebrating the nation's farmers and the more than 22 million working in agriculture and related fields. Agriculture is correctly called the backbone of this country, with a single farmer supplying food to 129 people in the U.S. and other countries.

Modern farm technology pays off in an abundance of foods, many of which weren't even thought of 20 years ago, and as consumers we spend only 9 percent of our income on food. Analysts say we work an average of 35 days to pay for the food we eat in a year's time.

With vastly improved equipment, superior crop genetics and an overall better understanding of their jobs thanks to the information super highway, farmers are able to work almost four times the amount of land they did in 1900. But, sadly, the number of farmers is shrinking.

There's the bad news.

There are fewer farms and fewer farmers every year. The end of the tobacco program as we have known it has farmers getting out of the business as farmland is increasingly lost to residential development, shopping centers or other non-farm uses.

Admittedly, remaining farm operations are larger — 162 acres on average in Kentucky and 443 acres nationwide — and farmers are more efficient and sophisticated, but the fact remains we're losing farmers by the thousands every year.

In the latest ag statistics, Kentucky had a good year in 2004 with cash receipts of \$4 billion, up \$600 million from the previous census. Barren County continues to be a statistical leader in Kentucky agriculture, generating farm income of \$78 million in 2004, but like the rest of Kentucky is seeing farmland disappear. In 1997, Barren County had 2,184 farms containing 252,739 acres. The 2004 census showed 2,021 farmers, losing 163 farm operations over the period, with 240,440 acres, down some 12,000 acres. The surprising stat is that harvested



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cropland over the period rose some 11,000 acres, showing the farmers who are still in operation are making better use of the land.

Barren County is still ranked among the top in all categories including beef cattle, dairy cattle, corn production, and forage crops. We are still No. 1 in livestock inventory and in milk production.

Since no viable substitution has been found for tobacco as of yet, the picture looks bleak for the small farms that once dotted the landscape of Barren and surrounding counties.

Constant demand for new housing and for business development further complicate the picture and rural residents are still resistant to land use planning that could preserve much of the farmland in Barren County.

For those of us who depend on farmers to provide the food we need every day, it's appropriate for us to salute them for their efforts in conserving our precious farmland so that future generations can enjoy the abundance we have come to take for granted.

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